

SCOTTSDALE - U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell today called on President Obama to focus on and address the needs of our troops, returning veterans and their families in his upcoming Oval Office speech.

"The war doesn't end when they leave the battlefield," said Mitchell. "I hope the President addresses our troops and returning veterans and the struggles they face when they return home. Each day an estimated 18 veterans commit suicide. This is tragic and unacceptable. The Pentagon and the VA need to provide better outreach to soldiers and veterans who are at risk, as well as to their families. Getting and providing help is a sign of strength, not weakness. They need to know where to turn to get the help they need."

Last month, Mitchell, who chairs the House Veterans Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, chaired a hearing examining why the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) had recently stopped successful outreach efforts to reach veterans at risk for suicide. The outreach included a public service announcement (PSA) featuring former Forrest Gump star Gary Sinise promoting a suicide hotline for veterans. Video of the PSA can be found [here](#) . [Source: [Mitchell Release](#) , July 14, 2010]

As of April 2010, the VA has reported nearly 7,000 rescues of actively suicidal veterans, which were attributed to seeing the ads, PSAs, or promotional products. Additionally, referrals to VA mental health services increased. In Phoenix, the VA reported a 234 percent increase in calls to the suicide hotline within 30 days of the launch of its public awareness campaign. However, late last year, the VA told Mitchell that, despite the success, the PSAs had stopped airing. [Source: [Congressional Inquiry](#) , March 2010]

Mitchell has continued to call on VA to explain why the VA has stopped airing a successful public service announcement at a recent subcommittee hearing. [Source: [Mitchell Release](#) , July 14, 2010]

The suicide hotline is often the front line of the government's expanding efforts to deter suicide among veterans. [[New York Times](#) , July 30, 2010]

In June, the Army experienced a record high number of suicides. *USA Today* reported that "the suicide rate among 18-to29-year old men who've left the military has gone up significantly."

Specifically, according to
The New York Times

, veterans account for about one in five of the more than 30,000 suicides committed in the United States each year. [Source:

[USA Today](#)

, Jan. 11, 2010;

[New York Times](#)

, July 30, 2010]

Last month, the Army released a 15-month-long study that reported that in Fiscal Year 2009, 239 soldiers committed suicide in both the active duty and reserve force. Additionally, 146 soldiers died due to "high risk" behavior, including 74 drug overdoses. During the same time frame there were 1,713 suicide attempts. [Source: [CNN](#) , July 29, 2010]

"We must keep in touch with our returning vets. We have to educate families about the problems that could develop once a loved one returns," Mitchell told the *Arizona Republic* in July. "One of the things that hopefully comes out of this type of program is that we destigmatize mental illness. These problems are happening to heroes. These aren't weak people. But after they come back from deployments we are losing too many to suicide." [Source:

[Arizona Republic](#)

, August 20, 2010]

Mitchell has repeatedly called upon the VA to increase outreach to veterans who need mental health services and are at risk of suicide. Out of an estimated veteran population of 23 million veterans, only about 8 million veterans are enrolled for care through the VA [Source: [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) , April 28, 2010]

Since 2007, Congressman Mitchell and the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations which he chairs, has been examining the epidemic of suicide rates among Veterans, and the VA's efforts to reach out to veterans at risk. [Sources: [Mitchell Release](#) , November 19, 2007; For additional information about the epidemic of veteran suicides:

[CBS News](#)

, November 13, 2007]

Until 2008, the VA had a self-imposed ban on TV advertising as a means to conduct outreach to veterans - including outreach to those at risk for suicide. Mitchell began calling upon the VA to reverse its long-standing self-imposed ban on television advertising and increase outreach to

veterans who need mental health services and are at risk of suicide. In 2008, the VA reversed the ban, and launched a pilot public awareness campaign in Washington, DC to inform veterans and their families about where they can turn for help - which was ultimately expanded nationally. [Source: [CBS News](#) , July 14, 2008; [Mitchell Release](#) , June 18, 2008]

###